The Arts and Education Reform: Lessons from a 4-year Pilot of the A+ Schools Program

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This report, developed by Catherine Awsumb Nelson, synthesizes the findings of a 4-year evaluation of the A+ Schools Program pilot in 25 North Carolina Schools. The evaluation was directed by Bruce Wilson and Dickson Corbett of Wilson-Corbett Associates of Philadelphia and by George Noblit of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The evaluation findings are explored in greater depth in a series of seven policy reports, each of which looks at the program through a different thematic lens. The reports in the series are:

- #1 CONTEXT
 - Placing A+ in a National Context: A Comparison to Promising Practices for Comprehensive School Reform
- #2 HISTORY

A History of the A+ Schools Program

#3 CREATIVITY

Reforming with the Arts: Creativity in A+ Classrooms and Schools

#4 RESILIENCE

Educational Resilience in the A+ Schools Program: Building Capacity through Networking and Professional Development

#5 WISE PRACTICES

Wise Practices in the North Carolina A+ Schools Program: A Practitioners' Guide to Reforming with the Arts

#6 EFFECTS

The A+ Schools Program: School, Community, Teacher, and Student Effects

#7 IDENTITY

The Arts, School Identity, and Comprehensive Education Reform: A Final Report from the Evaluation of the A+ Schools Program

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Introduction and Overview of the Report

What role can the arts play in comprehensive school reform that improves learning opportunities for all students? The place of the arts in public education has been a subject of ongoing and often polarized debate in the United States. Are the arts and the creativity they engender an inherently valuable part of every student's education? Or should the arts be valued and given a place in the curriculum only to the extent that they enhance achievement in core academic subjects? As opinions cycle between valuing arts for creativity and valuing them for instrumentality, policymakers alternately pump up and cut back funding levels for the arts in public education.

This report attempts to broaden and reframe the debate through a presentation of key findings from the evaluation of the 4-year pilot of the A+ Schools Program in 24 North Carolina Schools. The A+ Schools Program, sponsored by the Kenan Institute for the Arts, is a comprehensive school reform that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn. The A+ approach to learning draws on Howard Gardner's (1983, 1991) extensive research on multiple intelligences and other recent research on the brain and learning. By design, A+ rejects the dichotomy of creativity vs. instrumentality that historically has constrained the role of the arts in education reform. Rather than seeing the arts and the creative thinking they foster as necessarily distinct from core academic subjects, A+'s premise is that the arts can open up deeper understandings of the curriculum precisely because their creativity taps into the multiple ways that students learn. A+ is a truly comprehensive education reform because it begins with a vision of arts-integrated instruction creating enhanced learning opportunities for all students. Other changes in school practice, in areas ranging from assessment to scheduling to parent involvement, radiate out as necessary to achieve that central vision.

The findings highlighted in this report suggest that comprehensive school reform driven by arts integration has effects on schools, communities, teachers, and students far beyond those that show up in standardized tests focused on basic skills. During the 4-year pilot period, A+ schools achieved growth on North Carolina's accountability tests comparable to that of other schools statewide, but they also experienced more profound changes. The Kenan Institute's long-term investment in building the capacity of participating schools and teachers, in fostering a supportive network among participating schools, in buffering them from shifting political and policy winds that so often derail fledging reforms, in facilitating their adaptation of the reform to their particular local contexts, and in conducting extensive on-the-ground evaluation allows the A+ pilot to make a uniquely valuable contribution to the debate over the arts in education reform.

Based on the 4-year evaluation whose design is described in the appendix, this report presents an overview of the A+ program and its impacts. The report is organized to answer 4 key questions about A+:

- I. What is A+ and how have schools implemented it?
- II. What is different for A+ schools, communities, teachers, and students after 4 years?
- III. What evidence is there that these effects have been institutionalized?

IV. What lessons does the A+ experience hold for effective school reform generally?

The following chart summarizes the responses to the report's organizing questions. The report synthesizes the findings from the series of seven policy reports described in the Appendix.

OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

What is A+ and how did schools implement it?

The A+ Program is a comprehensive school reform that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn in all subjects. The strategies that schools used to implement the program included:

Curriculum/Instruction Strategies

- Increasing arts instruction
- Fostering two-way arts integration
- Tapping multiple intelligences
- Emphasizing hands-on learning
- Taking an integrated, thematic approach to the curriculum

Organizational Strategies

- Increasing professional collaboration
- Strengthening schools' partnerships

What is different for A+ schools, communities, teachers, and students after four years?

Effects on schools **Effects on teachers** Effects on Effects on students communities Arts were New partnerships Instructional change Enriched academic legitimized Increased parent for enhanced environment Increased participation and learning Increased equity in organizational awareness of opportunities access to the capacity curriculum Collaborative work curriculum Increased channels Greater parent and new leadership Improved attitudes, of communication affiliation with roles attendance, and More focused school Richer, more behavior identity educationally Assessment results substantive assessment

What evidence is there that these effects have been institutionalized?

At the local level

- More arts instruction/personnel retained after pilot funding
- More arts integration in the regular curriculum
- More thematic units
- More collaborative planning

At the state level

- Incorporation of program funding into regular state budget
- Official approval as a "comprehensive school reform" model
- New schools joining

Program wide: Responsive adaptation

What lessons does the A+ experience hold for effective school reform generally?

- Reform doesn't end when the pilot does
- Investments in human capital result in a resilient reform
 - Leveraging the power of a network
 - Adopting a school wide approach to professional development
 - Emphasizing the <u>professional</u> in professional development
 - Facilitating a process, not marketing a product
- Changes in culture and practice must be supported by structural changes, particularly in the use of time
- Accept ambiguity and the need balance seemingly opposing approaches
- Sustainable education reform requires a political strategy
- School reform can be comprehensive without being overwhelming

Note: These three pages are the opening pages of the Executive Summary of the eight-part evaluation of the A+ Schools Program.